

May 18, 2018

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Successful partnership continues for regional veterans' court

Tempe, AZ – The Tempe-based East Valley Regional Veterans' Court is about to celebrate its two-year anniversary of providing needed help to current and former U.S. military service members.

The cities of Tempe, Chandler and Scottsdale, and the towns of Fountain Hills, Carefree, Cave Creek, Gilbert and Paradise Valley, joined together in July 2016 to open a central court in Tempe that could hear all of the municipalities' dockets involving eligible veterans. Since then through March 2018, 705 veterans have had their cases referred to the court and 296 veterans have completed all required steps and graduated the program.

Last night, the Tempe City Council voted to enable the program to continue by accepting a grant and approving an intergovernmental agreement among the municipalities to continue operating the court in Tempe and share the costs. The \$53,000 grant from the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services is for the 2018-19 fiscal year, which begins July 1.

The court helps resolve veterans' misdemeanor and other violations for everything from trespassing and disorderly conduct to domestic violence and DUI. Many veterans need assistance addressing homelessness, substance abuse, mental health, anger management and conflict resolution issues. Each veteran must agree to a case plan that may include counseling or treatment, in order to work on the issues that may be holding them back in civilian life. Social service agencies and the Department of Veterans Affairs collaborate with the court to create a customized plan for each veteran. If they make progress, they may get reduced or waived jail time or fines.

Judge Pro Tempore Gregg Maxon is Presiding Judge of the East Valley Regional Veterans' Court. A veteran himself, Maxon said that support from all the participating cities has allowed court processes to mature and be successful.

“While each participating court maintains authority over its cases, the level of services each veteran receives is consistent across the board,” he said. “Bringing services to the court ensures our veterans have the best treatments available.”

Mesa resident Stephan Fowler, 52, considers the East Valley Regional Veterans' Court to have been a literal lifesaver. Arrested for DUI in 2016 in Tempe, the retired Marine said he had to come face-to-face with his PTSD and tendency to self-medicate with alcohol. He sought court-directed treatment from the Department of Veterans Affairs and was astounded to find out that a physical exam showed he had a cancerous tumor near his right hip.

The court put Fowler's proceedings on hold while he underwent surgery and treatment, and ultimately allowed him to do community service to resolve fines and fees after meeting other requirements. Today he is cancer-free. Fowler continues counseling sessions and is today a rare consumer of alcohol.

"For me, it was kind of a lifesaver," he said. "If it wasn't for Veterans' Court, what may have happened?"

Fowler works in telecommunications engineering and has committed himself to continuing volunteer work for the court and community outreach events for veterans.

The most recent and previous grants from the Arizona Department of Veterans Services have made the court possible. The East Valley Regional Veterans' Court is funded in part by the Arizona Department of Veterans Services as made available through the Arizona Veterans' Donations Fund.